

THE SPINNING
WOMAN OF THE SKY
POEMS

BY

ALICE CORBIN

Henderson

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To Helen Hoyt -

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Nov. 1913.

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THE SPINNING WOMAN
OF THE SKY





THE SPINNING WOMAN OF THE SKY POEMS

BY

ALICE CORBIN

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William Penhallow Henderson*

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To A. W. R.

*As to a living spirit, which no grave
Can mark the compass of—this life you gave,
These fadeless flowers, these carven lines I bring;
Accept this votive, living offering.*

*And an old man appeared out of the dusk,
With the odor of twilight and a forgotten charm,
And lured me away o'er the transient seas
That moved as the hills of the earth.
I forgot then my name and my destiny,
But my name and my destiny followed afar
Crying, "Follow the old man with the white hair,
And we follow with thee."
"Who is the old man with the white hair?" said my dream,
And my name and my destiny answered and said,
"Oh, he is the father of Muses and Norns,
The father of even Apollo."
So forgetting my name and my destiny,
These forgot not, but moved over the transient seas,
And I found them at last where the pale moon in water
Endures till the tablets of earth are no more.*

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THE SPINNING WOMAN OF THE SKY

I.

SING, SILVER HARP.

Sing, silver harp,
With golden strings,
Awaken the memory
Of all dim things.

Golden the harmony,
Golden the strings,
Silver the harp,
And the dove's grey wings.

Music of laughing
Or sleeping or crying,
Notes that are rising
Or falling or dying

Leap into being,
And dreams are stirred,
As some dim pool
By a flitting bird ;

Cloudy visions,
And memories deep,
Low as laughter,
And faint as sleep,

Shadowy faces
Known in dream,
Pass as petals
Upon a stream.

Sing, silver harp,
With golden strings,
Awaken the memory
Of all dim things.

THE SPINNING WOMAN OF THE SKY.

I have heard the spinning woman of the sky,
Who sings as she spins,
No one knows where my web ends,
Or where it begins.

For the thin-spun, glistening, silver thread
Out of her breast is drawn,
And her white feet caught in the silver web,
Through dark and dawn.

Weary of time and the spinning,
She sings as she spins,
I do not know where my web ends,
Or where it begins.

THE LYRE.

Autumn color and twilight moon,
Thin-blown leaves, and a twisted fire
Climbing the edge of the waves to the moon;
Slender and thin as a silver wire,
The voice of the moon, and the keen desire
That calls through birches and delicate laces
Of pale gold leaves, invisible faces
Of lovers that linger where daylight wanes
For the ancient showers and liquid rains
That the full moon pours through the fragile veins.

From the rose-colored dreams of day,
To the wave-swept sands of the shore,
Secretly, shadows grey
Steal to the edge of the shore,
Steal to the silver sands,
Lifting their fragile hands:

*Give us the twisted fire,
Fill us with old desire,
Moon of the maddened lyre,
Moon of the singing wire!*

The golden leaves grow grey and fall,
Twilight dies in the west,
The sea-gull turns to the wave for rest,
The land-bird dips to the sheltered nest,

But the shadows keep their quest,
And over the baréd breast,
The silver arrows fall;
Still the liquid fire
Wakes the old desire,
Liquid showers and liquid rains
Fill the heart and the beating veins.

THE SILVER BALL.

Ever before my feet I cast
A silver ball;
The world turns, and the winds cry,
And the seas fall,

But ever before my feet
The silver ball
Shows me a path of light
Where the stars call.

At times I stand in the midst
Of the silver ball,
Radiant, crystal moon,
Flooding all;

And then, so small at my feet,
The silver ball
I catch and hurl in the air
Over the trees tall;

And out of the changing world,
The silver ball
Guides me over the ancient way
Where the stars call;

And never I turn aside
From the ancient way,
But I follow the silver ball
Night and day.

THE ETERNAL IDOL

Pygmalion Speaks

At the white stone feet of the goddess,
I cry my old despair;
Golden and silver and sapphire lights
Gleam in her hair;
Her eyes are dull with the longing
Of an immortal love,
As my ears are deaf with the music
Of the silver-crowned dove.
In the rounded arch of her shoulder
Is the zone of infinity,
And music flows like water
From the bended plane of her knee;
Her waist is the faint horizon
Where night and day are drawn,
Her low left hip is the twilight,
And her right hip is the dawn.
Her breasts are hills of wisdom,
And the pale pink rose
Of the summit is veiled with marble,
Where the color comes and goes,
That the eyes of the unbelieving
May never be aware
Of the life that breathes in the subtle veins
And awakens the old despair.
But I who have looked with the longing
That only a god could bear,

From the white feet of the goddess,
To the dim pearls in her hair,
Press longing immortal with longing,
Where the delicate pulses beat,
And worship eternal beauty
At her white stone feet.

WHAT DIM ARCADIAN PASTURES.

What dim Arcadian pastures
Have I known
That suddenly, out of nothing,
A wind is blown,
Lifting a veil and a darkness,
Showing a purple sea —
And under your hair the faun's eyes
Look out on me?

ADONIS.

Love is a changing lord,
As the light on a turning sword,
 Changing —
Amethyst, silver, or gold;
As fauns, or as dryads of old,
 Ranging;
Careless of symbol or form,
Coming in quiet or storm,
 Blowing
Over the heart like a wind,
Nor sorrowful, nor unkind,
 Going;
Brilliant and gay as a Greek
Marble that seems to speak,
 Knowing
All that the flesh would fain;
As the waters that leave no stain,
 Flowing.
He who would seek to find
Love, must go seek the wind
 Flying
High above whispering strings,
Far from all mortal things,
 Dying;
He who would seek to know
Love, be content to go
 Veiling

Ever his eyes from blight,
Up where the dawn's clear light,
 Paling,
Covers the stars and the moon,
Covers the sun at noon,
 Giving
Essence of all divine
Lost in the sense of time,
 Living.
Life that is but a breath,
What, then, is change, or death?
 Mortals,
Loving love as they love the wind,
Out of the world, and the world's way find
 Portals.

RODIN'S EVE.

This is the mother of the human race,
Standing abashed with half-averted face
Before the glory and splendor of her dream.
In her the vision of the years that seem
Now girdled in dead centuries to wind
In endless flower-chains about the mind —
Treacheries, and ecstasies, and darkened rivers
Of crimson, where they crucify the Givers;
Her beauty is by far more perilous
Than that of her, the sometime mother of us,
Who comes amid the perfect harmony
Of lips and loves, and dwells in ecstasy:
More infinite her labours and her pains. . . .
The seed of all the world is in her veins!

SHADES.

Daphnis and Chloe wandered far
Through fields of asphodel,
But could not find the spot on earth
Where they were wont to dwell.

*And was it here, cried Chloe, pale
As wraith of morning mist,
We ate the snow-white curds, and you
My lips and eye-lids kissed?*

*Alas, I know not, Daphnis said,
For all is here so bright!*
Then trembling turned with clinging hands,
And vanished in the light.

II.

WORLD'S END.

My heart that was so careless and so proud
No sorrow might find place in it to rest,
Has passed amid the sobbing, changing crowd
Of dreams that fade and die in the dim west.
No music joyous and no songs' delight
Awakens the dim silence of the sea
That drops beyond the farthest edge of night,
And circles in an endless reverie.

O SHADOWS OF MOVING WATERS.

O shadows of moving waters,
O waves that are never at rest,
I have seen the pale moon's driven horses
That hurry away to the west;
I have been in the midst of your forces,
On the white driven foam of your breast,
And the dream of your changing faces
Keeps me from peace and from rest.

MOON OF PEACE.

Lap me in scented waters, moon of peace,
In silver waters flowing under the moon,
For now the water-bearer's pouring flood
Pours rivers of silver peace under the moon.
The dragon is killed, the archer's arrow sped,
The bearded goat has trampled out the wine,
And now the water-bearer's pouring flood
Pours rivers of silver peace and silver wine.

GREY WOODS.

Silence is heavy and somber in the grey woods,
The leaves of time drop stealthily one by one;
Dim twilight comes with a shadowy reaping hook
To gather the fading daylight and dead leaves.
Though no winds blow in the grey woods of my heart,
The leaves of time drop stealthily one by one;
A shadowy twilight falls over the shadowy woods —
My body is too frail for its great moods.

THE CUP-BEARER.

One is cup-bearer, one the cup;
One is athirst, and one must drink;
Oh, hold the silver vessel up,
And I will fill it to the brink!

THE HOUSE OF AENGUS.

Love came into his secret house,
His tower of glass, at the fall of night,
Where there is neither sun nor moon,
Wind nor wave, but a world of light.
Love came into his secret house,
Deep in the world, under the wave,
And the stars fell down from the trembling roof,
And the harp that Etain gave
Quivered and wakened and all its strings
Whispered and sang with a wild delight,
When Love came into his secret house,
His tower of glass, at the fall of night.

THE POMEGRANATE.

A little while our joy was twain,
But now my separate self is slain.
A druid by the waters old,
In robes of white and reddened gold,
Who, in the wonder and the dark
And vague faint mystery of the ark,
Beheld all nature change and burn,
And was a sword or wave by turn,
Did not with a more sacred rite
His soul to that far soul unite.
A little while our joy was twain,
But now my separate self is slain;
The fruit is ripened and the seed
Is floating over rush and reed,
The plastic world is molded fresh
With but one body and one flesh;
I only know your joy, your pain
Because my separate self is slain.

SONG.

You are more golden than leaves,
More lyrical than light;
More brilliant than the high noon-day,
Or the sun in his might.

I am more silver than waves,
More pale than night,
More sad than the waning moon
In the grey dawn's light.

But I shine through your golden leaves,
And I sing in your light,
And the earth will remember our history
Many a long night.

SEA MUSIC.

O waters white with human sacrifice,
O waves that rear your bosoms in the sun,
Proud is your plastic music, O white waves —
White breasts, white hips, white shoulders, flowing hair,
Your voice forever calling — O white waves,
The white line of your shore is filled with spirits
That rise from out the mist on moonlit nights;
O white waves calling ever under the moon,
And luring to an unknown sacrifice.
White are the bones that lie beneath the surface,
Whiter than sands of moonlight on the shore;
In the tumultuous life of moving waters
The secret of the world is hidden away,
And even now the waters dim are calling,
And luring to an unknown sacrifice;
The air is still and quiet, as with vision,
But now and then a foot moves in the waves,
The white foot of a goddess; and the voice
Of ancient waters brooding over the world
Laps on the shore and lures to sacrifice.
Older than nature, mother even of nature,
Your white feet turn and leave no trace behind,
And nature's children, weary of her kisses,
Are fain in you to wash away all stain;
O white waves calling, calling under the moon,

O buried breasts and knees that make a bed
Softer than vision and as cool as marble,
Your voice forever calling, O white waves,
Laps on the shore and lures to sacrifice.

THE HOLLOW WOOD.

Rêve Celtique.

Grey woods and waters where the brown bird leaves
Its shadow for a moment on the pool ;
Then silence, save a little wind that grieves
Among the reeds and waving grasses cool —

This dim forgotten land where no man dwells,
But ruin, desolation, and despair,
A sound of sea-drowned music, sunken bells,
The burial of all things bright and fair,

This place of old, forgotten ecstasies,
This ancient place of unremembered things,
Sad when the wind sighs through the waiting trees,
Sadder than ever when the brown bird sings —

For Danu, Lir, and Cleena with light feet,
Who tossed the bubble of the world away,
And with light laughter, music low and sweet,
Covered it over and left it till a day,

Have vanished with their softly waving spells,
Their flame-white dances and bright hair wind-tossed —
Sadder than deaths the wars of worlds have cost,
The keening of the wind in these low dells:

While we have turned from beauty and have lost
Our sense of ancient kinship with the earth,
Under the running wave the flaming host
Dance in the heart of time and know no birth.

KINSHIP.

I am still climbing the upward path, but soon I shall go
down,

Down unto the silence and the deep peace underground;
Though still the morning beckons and the air is incense-
crowned,

Deep, deep within my heart's curved shell, I hear a rushing
sound;

A cry of million voices and a sound of million feet,
In air, on earth, and in the sea where waving branches are;
When deep the earth lies over me, I shall not grieve afar,
But turn and touch, though lying there, the farthest shining
star.

AS ON A DUSKY ARRAS.

As on a dusky arras,
The Lords of Shadow go,
With vague and tremulous movement,
Passing to and fro.

Some with crownéd helmets,
Pale or ruby gold,
Some with cross and crozier,
Shepherds of the fold,

Some with flowing gesture,
Some in silence white,
Lovers pale but glowing still
With a wan delight.

They drift and pass and vanish,
And my heart streams there
In shapes of unknown beauty
Upon the twilight air;

But lest I too turn shadow,
And fall in flaming dew,
Before the outworn vesture
Be fit for senses new,

I part the dusky arras,
Where, passing to and fro,
With vague and tremulous movement,
The Lords of Shadow go.

SYMBOLS

Who was it built the cradle of wrought gold?
A druid, chanting by the waters old.
Who was it kept the sword of vision bright?
A warrior, falling darkly in the fight.
Who was it put the crown upon the dove?
A woman, paling in the arms of love.
Oh, who but these, since Adam ceased to be,
Have kept their ancient guard about the Tree?

III.

AMERICA.

I hear America singing,

And the great prophet passed,
Serene, clear, and untroubled,
Into the silence vast.

When will the master poet
Rise with vision strong
To mold her manifold music
Into a living song?

I hear America singing,

Beyond the beat and stress,
The chant of her shrill, unjaded,
Empiric loveliness.

Laughter, beyond mere scorning,
Wisdom surpassing wit,
Love, and the unscathed spirit,
These shall encompass it.

TO THE RULERS OF MODERN NATIONS.

Not by too tardy gifts may ye atone
The negligence with which ye greet the young men,
Whose hearts are high, whose words go up in song,
To whom your storied memories belong,
And who may slight, when slight is all their wage,
And ye be mocked by simplest fool and sage.

If ye would live in monument of stone,
Take heed the greeting that ye give the young men;
Theirs is a weightier and more high emprise
Than all your bargaining of merchandise;
'Tis theirs to wring some meaning from the sky
Why ye should live, or dying, should not die.

If ye would die in time's oblivion,
Then greet, as now, with negligence, the young men;
If ye would live memento of their rage,
Give no bold answer to their far-flung gage;
Theirs is the cup, but yours the final doom —
The words they write in scorn upon your tomb.

DAPHNE.

But thou shalt ever lie dead, nor shall there be any remembrance of thee then or thereafter, for thou hast not of the roses of Pieria

—Sappho to a Good Housekeeper.

What greater grief could be
Than to be born a poet — and a woman!
To have to mind the trivial daily tasks
That bind the heart from revery and dream,
Or else to earn the scorn of the whole world!
And yet the world will marvel that no woman
Achieves the artist's laurel!....

Ah, Daphne!
Who fled before the bright beams of Apollo,
Transfixed at last in his own clinging laurel!

Thus is it to stand rooted deep in life,
Yet wrapped in green flame of the clinging laurel.

MODERNITY.

Dedicated to the Zeitgeist.

There is no such thing
As your far-famed modernity.

Your rearing catapults of iron and steel,
Your bruited brunt
Of traffic, toil, and havoc,
Your impact of metals,
The hue and cry of concrete monoliths,
—No newer these than Egypt's pyramids,
Or Asia's discards of imagination.

This piquant brotherhood of man and man,
—How the old sages of the earth must laugh!

How whimsical to the enfranchised spirit
The strides gigantic of art's modern progress!

In one brief moment of contemporary
Time
Our uncouth efforts;
While Tahitian girls
Weave coral poppies in their cloudy hair,
And to an unknown music, haunting, strange,
Cambodgienne dancers of the golden age
Confuse chronology

Modernity!

IV.

JEHOVAH

God the Omnipotent,
How Thy purpose fails!
How little all
Thy thundering speech avails:

For somewhere in
The heart of man and beast,
Thy word of famine
Turneth to a feast;

And even while
The Soul of nature bleeds,
On lilies white
It pastureth and feeds.

ST. JOHN'S EVE.

Over the valley and on the hill —
Rock-scarred ribs of the ancient sire —
Sire and mother and child in one;

Fire, primeval fire!

Flaunting flames to the high clouds flung,
Vain and futile their fretful ire,
Summer is come and the harvest won;

Fire, primeval fire!

Fruitful passion of earth and tree —
Dancing shadows about the pire,
Buds that blossom and maids that flower;

Fire, primeval fire!

Bidart, Pays Basque.

THE FAILING MOON.

Last night I saw the failing moon
Scatter its petals through the sky,
And all the heavenly gardens shook,
As though a wind went by,

And all the petals of the sea
Cast upward on the pulsing sand,
Were white as at the touch of death,
That nothing can withstand ;

Throughout the whole world, sick with dread,
Swiftly an aching pallor ran ;
The world was dead, dead — all was dead
Since first slow time began.

That loving face Earth used to wear
Midst tender green and blue of flowers,
Of mortal fairness, mortal sweet,
Was but a dream of ours ;

A childish fantasy of play
That turns to life some happy spot,
Thereafter dead, as long before —
The brightness lingers not.

For here beneath my trembling feet,
Earth's face shows lifeless, overcast
With shadows of some dreaming world,
Prophetic, or long past ;

Some other dream, some other world
Gave life and passion birth,
And ours it is to love and live
And perish with the earth.

Ah, long ago, who was it cast
A thought into the void of space
That made the earth and made the stars
And made each little place

Aflame with life, and then forgot,
As children in a race,
That now we wait, as some old house,
For a familiar face?

THE STAR.

I saw a star fall in the night,
And a grey moth touched my cheek;
Such majesty immortals have,
Such pity for the weak.

NODES.

The endless, foolish merriment of stars
Beside the pale cold sorrow of the moon,
Is like the wayward noises of the world
Beside my heart's uplifted silent tune.

The little broken glitter of the waves
Beside the golden sun's intense white blaze,
Is like the idle chatter of the crowd
Beside my heart's unwearied song of praise.

The sun and all the planets in the sky
Beside the sacred wonder of dim space,
Are notes upon a broken, tarnished lute
That God will some day mend and put in place.

And space, beside the little secret joy
Of God that sings forever in the clay,
Is smaller than the dust we can not see,
That yet dies not, till time and space decay.

And as the foolish merriment of stars
Beside the cold pale sorrow of the moon,
My little song, my little joy, my praise,
Beside God's ancient, everlasting rune.

THE SONG OF THE MOON.

Clouds like the petals of a rose,
Open slowly and disclose
The golden heart of the moon;
The waves grow soft upon the sand,
The wind dies down upon the land,
Beauty and silence weave a tune
Out of the petals of the moon.

Over the breasts of waves,
Her petals fall;
Silvery crested billows
Meet and melt in her soft embrace;
Pale and proud as a woman, her face
Shines through the misty willows.
O golden heart of the moon!
Whispers the leafy tune;
And the pine-trees tall
Reach high and call
Till over them lightly as soft as day,
Or rose-colored blossoms of the May,
Over the pine-trees dark and tall,
The golden petals fall.

THE HARP OF THE ANCIENTS.

The world is an organ outside tonight,
When the tall trees bend, and the wind's awake,
Playing its master harmonies
On the harp that must quaver or break!

The world is an organ, and all night long
I lie and listen to the song;
For I can not sleep, for I fear I would dream
And wake to the sound of the organ's scream.

O Powers that live in the raging wind,
Lie down in peace, for the lion and lamb
No longer quarrel, and God indeed
Lives in the oak and the sapling and reed;

Will ye not cease from your warring now,
And let peace come to the bending bough,
To the wave that beats on the quiet shore—
Bring peace to her bosom forevermore?

*Aloof, afar, the weary feet of Time
Come slowly down across the eastern mountains,
And find me grinding corn and drawing water,
And passing in contentment all my days.
Yet am I not unconscious of the dawn,
And lift my eyes sometimes to the sublime
Shadow upon the mountains, where I see
As one who fain would postpone destiny,
The laggard and unwilling feet of Time,
The weary feet of Time upon the mountains.*

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